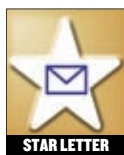




Letters

There are more questions than answers this month: is Firefox safer than Internet Explorer? Can you actually buy any of the PCs we review in Labs? And do you get wasted when your processor's pasted?

FOX HUNTING



Forgive me for being somewhat confused regarding the security benefits of Mozilla Firefox. In *What's New, Shopper* December 2005 you state that Firefox "is more secure [than Microsoft Internet Explorer]". However, reading further on, the magazine's stance becomes slightly hazy. In *Newsfile* in the same issue you appear to trust a statement from Symantec that claims that, far from being more secure, Firefox actually has more vulnerabilities. I would be grateful for some clarity over this matter, before someone runs off with my identity.

Martin Price

☹ All software has the potential for bugs, and some of those will create vulnerabilities that an attacker could exploit and use to take control of your PC. Web browsers are particularly likely to be at risk, because they access files on the internet that could have been created by anyone, including baddies intent on stealing your credit card number.

When we reviewed Firefox in *Shopper* February 2005, the browser was not vulnerable to a wide range of the problems that plagued Internet Explorer. We liked it mainly because of its superior features, however.

Since then the Firefox browser has become more popular, which means that hackers and security researchers took a greater interest in it. They started finding security holes that, as with

Internet Explorer, were fixed. But who knows what holes will appear in either browser in the future?

While neither product is more or less secure than the other, it's worth remembering that Internet Explorer is embedded into Windows XP, and this increases the likelihood of a vulnerability in the browser, allowing an attacker access to the operating system, which is not a good thing. This gives Firefox a slight technical edge when it comes to security, but when using either product it is essential to keep abreast of developments and apply updates as quickly as possible.

MISLEADING READING?

Your Labs review of £799 Supersystems (*Shopper* November 2005) seemed most helpful, illustrating the variety of impressive models now available at that price. At least I assumed they would be available. Wanting a PC geared for image editing, I checked the Carrera website first. Disappointingly I could find no mention of the Vision 6600CS-11 the company supplied for your test. I've tried requesting information on this model from the Carrera sales department via its website but have received no reply at all.

That a sales department would ignore enquiries from a new customer seemed strange, so next I tried Evesham and could find no mention on its website of the Axis 64 GT either. A pattern seemed to be emerging. I checked the websites of all nine suppliers in the review. Of all these, I could find just a single one actually advertising the model it submitted to *Computer Shopper*. Gladiator was advertising the Jupiter 6600GT prominently and at £799, as quoted.

So, with that one honourable exception, are these suppliers actually selling these models, or are they just using *Computer Shopper* for free publicity and misleading customers?

Chris Dunlop

☹ Our PC Labs tests are very specific. One month we might review a group of PCs that are incredibly fast and powerful but cost quite a lot, while in other months we'll look at very inexpensive PCs. In each case we approach the PC manufacturers and explain what kind of systems we'll be reviewing.

If we gave these companies completely free rein we'd no doubt be sent only the most expensive models, so we specify a price and sometimes a use, such as playing games. In many cases the companies won't have a model in their ranges that perfectly suits our criteria, in which case the company builds a new one and sends it to us.

In many cases the model numbers show that the PC is a *Computer Shopper* review model, as it might have a code such as CS somewhere in the name. For example, the test to which you refer included the Carrera Vision 6600CS-11 and the Mesh Matrix Eclipse CS Xtra. This is generally how it works, although companies such as IBM and Gateway won't build PCs especially for computer magazine comparative reviews.

Every company that submits a PC for review should make it available for at least six weeks after that issue of *Computer Shopper* hits the newsstand (or your doormat). If you want to buy one you can, simply by calling the phone number listed and placing an order. However, some companies don't list review models on their websites because they are custom-made.

FREE RANGE

Your reviews of wireless equipment, such as routers, refer to their all-important transmission ranges in a somewhat arbitrary way. For example, the Buffalo AirStation (*What's New, Shopper* December 2005), gives throughput figures for ranges of 10m and 20m.

But what do you mean by this? 10m without obstructions, as the paper plane flies across the office? Or 10m through a brick wall or two, and a manager's dense brain? Or 10m through partitions and past a microwave that was zapping someone's lunch at the time?

For range figures to be helpful, they have to be clearly defined so that all products are tested in the same standard environments, against the same reference points. It would also



▲ The Mesh Matrix Eclipse CS Xtra was built especially for our Labs test

WRITE IN – AND WIN!

This month Adobe has launched a new bundle of software that includes the brand new version of Photoshop Elements. It has kindly agreed to give a copy to this month's star letter writer, furnishing Gavin with a powerful graphics program familiar to professional graphic designers, as well as the top-notch video-editing package Premiere Elements 2.0. Photoshop Elements 4.0 lets you edit and enhance your digital photos easily and effectively, while Premiere Elements makes it simple to edit your own home movies like a pro.



PLUS! Every letter-writer also receives a *Computer Shopper* mug



help if you could use a staff member's home as a benchmark test site to give effective ranges in a typical house.

On another point, Humphrey Klinkenberg (is that an anagram?) wrote to *Letters* to complain about phishing emails purporting to come from eBay. It is worth mentioning that eBay has an email address to which such phishing emails can be forwarded. It is spoofof@ebay.co.uk.

Alan Thomas

☛ We have a set of procedures for testing wireless equipment that enables us to reach useful figures regarding transmission ranges and data transfer speeds. The testing environment is a realistic representation of a home and small office scenario, set up in our dedicated testing labs.

We use the same 100MB large file as we use for our hard disk tests and copy this file over a wireless network to a PC at close range, 10m away on the other side of our lab. There is a single wall in the way. If it works, we repeat the test from 20m away, through a number of walls and a lift shaft. Each test is run three times. We record the time it takes for these to complete.

You can expect better ranges and speeds in environments where there are fewer obstacles, but in most real-world cases there will be at least one wall between you and the wireless access point or router.

With regards to your other point, thanks for notifying us about eBay's spoof-reporting service. However, we have no reason to believe that Humphrey's name is anything other than genuine.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

I am writing about your answer to the star letter in *Letters, Shopper* December 2005. I read of someone being fined for wandering the streets and using other people's wireless connections without their knowledge. Type "fined for accessing wireless network" into Google and you will see that a man in the UK was fined £500 and given a 12-month conditional discharge. You can read the report at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4721723.stm>.

To quote part of this BBC report, "the fact that Straszkiwicz narrowly escaped a harsher sentence, had to pay a £500 fine and had his laptop and wireless card confiscated indicates such squatting might not be worthwhile".

David Beamish

☛ Let's be clear about this. We in no way condone purposefully logging into people's wireless networks without their permission. It appears that Gregory Straszkiwicz sat in his car with a laptop and logged into a domestic wireless network. By logging in, the court decided that he had dishonestly obtained the use of an electronic service.

This is quite different from looking at a list of potentially available wireless networks and, by following the strength of the signal, locating the likely location of the access point. If you then approach the owner and inform them that their network is insecure, with no hint of blackmail in your manner, you should be OK. That's what we were getting at last month, not inciting *Shopper* readers to rampage their neighbourhood, logging into wireless networks with gay abandon.

That said, there is still some risk involved in roaming the streets with an expensive computer,

monitoring wireless networks. We wouldn't like to explain the subtle distinction between system monitoring and access to our neighbour, Mr F Hardknuckles, after he catches us loitering outside his house. Or to the gangs of hoodie-wearing, alcopop-sodden kids who patrol our area and who probably have little interest in the finer points of WEP and MAC address authentication.

GETTING PASTED

I received a shock when reading issue two of *Upgrade Shopper*. The article about applying thermal paste to processors stated that paste is toxic and gloves should be used. This is the first I had read in your magazine (or anywhere else) about this, and nowhere on the thermal paste packaging is there any labelling about it being toxic.

I don't think I will be alone in having transferred paste on to my fingers when installing heat sinks and processors. So what is the full information on toxic thermal pastes, and is this only a new issue with the latest pastes or has it always been the case?

Neil Bland

☛ Thermal pastes or greases come in three main types: metal-based, silicone-based and ceramic-based. Metal-based pastes such as Arctic Silver are the most effective and expensive, and are usually silver in colour. They often contain real silver, too. Ingesting silver in great quantities is not a great idea, even though humans have been using it medicinally for hundreds of years. It can result in argyria, which makes your gums go grey in the first stages and causes the skin to go grey over a period of time.

However, to put this threat in context, the normal human body contains 1mg of silver and amounts of 4-40g can cause argyria. You'd have to be a silver miner or long-term user of silver-based medication to be at risk. Getting a bit of thermal paste on your fingers at the weekend is not going to turn you into Barnum's Blue Man or give you internal problems. If you were to eat somewhere between 50mg to 500mg per 1kg of your body weight you'd probably die, but that's a lot of expensive thermal paste.

We're not aware of any dangerous silicone- or ceramic-based pastes but, as a rule, if your tube doesn't explicitly announce that it is non-toxic then take as much care not to get it on your fingers, in your mouth and in your eyes, as you would with any household cleaning product or a powerful glue. But if you accidentally ingest some, don't lose sleep over it.



Thermal paste is not a serious health risk – unless you decide to ingest huge quantities of it

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FLUSHED WITH PRIDE

I have been a subscriber to *Shopper* for the past six years and a reader for closer to 10. It is still the best publication out there by a mile and continues to keep up with the latest trends. I'm particularly fond of the *PC Builder* section and your recent article about painting was superb. *MacBiter* is always good for a giggle, too.

Shopper is my standard toilet literature and I very rarely write in when I think of a better answer to a question as I can't be arsed (no pun intended) to take the magazine into my room. But with the rebirth of the *Shopper* mugs and a shot at drinking from a chalice challenged only by the Grail itself, I had to have a try!

In *Helpfile*, *Shopper* November 2005, you told Dominic Gillespie that there is currently no way of getting files larger than 4GB on an iPod. This is true, but there is a workaround: compress the files that you need to transfer using RAR or Zip, then split the archive. This simple solution works on any file format and on any computer. You have to copy everything off before extracting the file, and it is not the quickest way to do things, but if transporting those big files on the iPod is vital, it works.

Simon Grimshaw

☺ Thanks for that, Simon. Your methodology is sound, although you sadly neglect to mention any programs that do the crucial job of splitting the archive. WinZip allows you to create large Zip files and can split them into custom sizes. There are also file-splitting utilities available, should you want to split a file without compressing it into a Zip file first. The File Splitter (www.dekabyte.com/filesplitter) is one of many such utilities.

OPEN SOURCE, CLOSED DOOR

When reading *Linux Expert*, *Shopper* December 2005, I noticed a passing comment that there are Linux distributions that work on a PlayStation 2, hinting that there are at least 70 hardware platforms on which Linux can be made to run.

Could I have a list of 'game station' consoles – PS1, PS2, GameCube and so on – on which Linux distributions are available? Of those, which can be made to understand a keyboard and USB interface? Of those devices remaining in the list, could *Shopper* consider putting a CD-ROM ISO file on a cover disc, please?

My reason for this rather specific request is that I am writing from prison and we are permitted to have games consoles and notebook PCs but not desktops. We are limited to a maximum of six electric appliances each. So, in these circumstances, many of us would find it very useful to be able to run a games console as a basic computer through the in-cell TV.

Many of us also have Sony Hi-MD audio players, which can store 300MB to 1GB of data.

This is available on a Linux PC as a hard disk mounted on /dev/sda, and I'd guess that a games console with USB would also make this mount point available for storage.

As Linux is open source, there wouldn't be any copyright infringements should game station distros be passed around between inmates.

Ciarán Collins

☺ It is possible to install a Linux-based operating system on many games consoles, although we'll restrict the following list to consoles into which you can plug a keyboard and mouse. We'll count using a USB drive as a bonus.

The PlayStation 2 is available in a number of models, which means yours might not be useable. If it has two USB ports it will work with a keyboard and mouse, a portable hard disk and other USB devices. Potentially you could plug in a USB GSM/GPRS modem and connect your PC to the internet, but we doubt prison regulations would allow this. Unintended readers could consider the Plug and Play USB GPRS Modem from www.sequoia.co.uk, which costs £95 including VAT and is compatible with Linux.

The next question is, which version of Linux will work? The most obvious choice is Sony's official, commercial version (<http://playstation2-linux.com>), but this is rarely available these days. You can get a kit from www.linuxplay.com for £120 inc VAT, which includes a hard disk. You'll need one of the earlier PlayStations, as the newer versions don't have space to hold the hard disk.

Once you have the kit in place you can install a free version of Linux that provides more tools. BlackRhino Linux (from <http://blackrhino.xrhino.com>) is a good option.

It's possible to install Linux on an Xbox but Bill doesn't like penguins invading his hardware and has implemented some protection. We can't go into the full details here, but instructions are available at www.xbox-linux.org. In short, you can download the Xebian distribution from this site, copy it to a CD and insert the CD as if it were a game.

The Dreamcast console supports mice and keyboards, which are sold separately. You can download a compatible version of Linux from www.m17n.org/linux-sh/dreamcast, and the site also includes installation instructions.

The Nintendo doesn't make a keyboard for the GameCube, but luckily Gamesseek.co.uk does. A company called Lik-sang.com sells several cables and adaptors at www.lik-sang.com/list.php?nav=over&category=76&. A compatible Linux distribution is available from www.gc-linux.org.

None of the techniques for installing Linux on consoles is entirely straightforward, so only real enthusiasts are likely to want to do it. Unfortunately, due to space restrictions on our cover disc, we are not able to include any of these games console Linux distributions. ☹



▲ You can install Linux on many games consoles, including PlayStations

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